

Producer ^{OF THE} Month

APRIL 2023



PANGAEA SUSHI



Florence, MA



Poe and Su Su



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer OF THE Month

By Ruth Garbus



PANGAEA SUSHI



I will use the names Myanmar and Burma interchangeably in this article, as Poe and Su Su did during our conversations.

Su Su Min Aung came to the U.S. in 2013 from Myanmar. In her life there, she was an elementary school teacher. But she always knew how to cook. When she arrived here, she jumped right into the little sushi business her husband, Poe, had started. Thanks to Su Su's finance and business skills and Poe's operational know-how, Pangaea Sushi has grown into a strong local business—one that now, with its presence here in Brattleboro, has deeply enriched our Co-op community.

Poe moved to the U.S. from Myanmar in 2004. His father was one of the lucky few to win the Diversity Visa lottery that year. Poe landed in New Jersey and started learning how to make sushi after the first two weeks of his arrival. Sushi is not part of traditional Burmese cuisine,

but grocery store sushi counters in the U.S. are almost exclusively owned and staffed by people who have immigrated from Myanmar. According to Zin, one of Pangaea's sushi chefs, eighty-five out of every hundred supermarket sushi counter chefs are from Burma. It was the easiest and most natural occupation for Poe to step into. And he was good at it.

For many years Poe worked for a big corporation as a "sushi specialist," traveling all over the country training other people how to make sushi for grocery store sushi counters. He has mixed feelings about this time in his life. He would travel to a new city or town and stay there for two, three, or four weeks, then hit the road again and start over in a new place. It was fun, but it was also challenging, and intense.

During these years on the road, a dream started to take shape in his mind: a buffet-style restaurant that would serve food from all over the

world. He would call it Pangaea, after the name of the giant super-continent that existed two hundred million years ago, before continental drift separated the Earth's land into the seven landmasses we live on today. Pangaea signified one world, food for everyone, food for the world.

Poe started making sushi at the River Valley Co-op in Northampton, MA, in 2010. His experience there was completely different from all the other supermarkets he'd worked in. "River Valley changed me," he says. For him, food co-op culture was unlike any of the other places he'd worked. He became one of the crew, part of the family, a friend among friends and an equal among equals. In fact, the people at River Valley were the ones who encouraged him to start his own business. From that bedrock of cooperative support and connection, Pangaea Sushi was born.

A few years later, Su Su was able to emigrate from Myanmar,



and became a U.S. citizen. When she arrived in Western Mass, she knew Northampton was where she wanted to live. She felt safe, welcomed, and embraced, and insisted they make the area their home. Before long, she, too, was working at River Valley making sushi. She continued to work there and to build Pangaea as she went through her first pregnancy, and her second. When River Valley opened their second location in Easthampton, Su Su orchestrated Pangaea's expansion, hiring more staff to make sushi in the new store. And soon after, they grew even more when they contracted with our Co-op.

As soon as they started here at the Brattleboro Food Co-op, they had the same experience that they'd had at River Valley: being embraced as part of the community, never other-ized or made to feel uncomfortable. Poe and Su Su both said over and over again how much they feel a part of our workplace family and how good their experiences have been here. And the feeling is mutual.

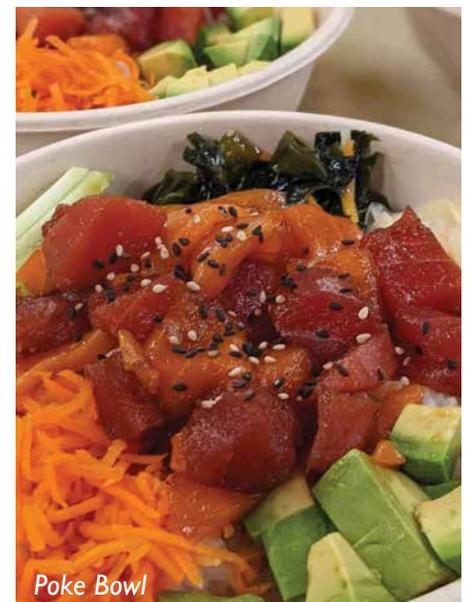


Those who work alongside members of the Pangaea staff love having them in the crew. Poe was the one working here during the first few months of our partnership, and he and Su Su loved it so much they even wanted to move here. It's all a reminder that food co-ops are genuinely different than other stores—kinder, more open, and imbued with the Cooperative Principles and Values. Now, Zin is the primary Pangaea employee working with us, and Su Su and Poe are staying in Western Mass so their kids, now ages seven and nine, can attend school there.

It's been a really big couple of years for Pangaea with these two expansions. They want to grow even more but, like many of our local vendors, not too much! Pangaea now has five staff members: Zin, Tun Tun, Aung Ko, Min, and Johnny. They plan to open a separate production facility, which would allow them to increase their catering business. But for now they're focused on serving this area, and Su Su wants to maintain the same personal touch and quality control that she's always had. She and Poe use three simple principles to guide them: Product (making sure the quality of their products is always the best it can be), People (building and maintaining great

relationships with everyone they work with, and making sure their staff are trained well), and Profit (supporting their family and taking care of themselves and their home). You'll notice Profit is the last of these tenets. To grow too big would undermine their mission.

Instead of having their own location, they rent space in our kitchen, where they keep equipment and make the sushi each day. That means their sushi is always fresh. When you buy it off our shelves, you can be sure it's been prepared that day on-site. They offer a lovely variety of delicious foods perfect for a quick, nutritious lunch. Sushi always feels





Avocado Inari

like a treat, but it's a healthier alternative to other indulgences! They make everything from simple vegetable rolls to more elaborate creations, like the Rainbow California roll, which is a standard California roll (avocado, imitation crab, cucumber = perfection) wrapped in tuna and salmon sashimi with thin slices of avocado. It's stunning! Their selections also go beyond sushi, and include poke bowls and seaweed salad. If you haven't tried their avocado inari yet, do yourself a favor and make a mad dash to the sushi case right now. The combination of dense and fluffy rice, chewy tofu skin, and cool, creamy avocado salad... it's absolutely divine, as everyone agrees. Su Su's favorite is the Crunchy Spicy Combo—she loves the blend of textures and flavors. Poe says his fave is the tempura shrimp, but more often he sticks with salmon in the morning and tuna at night.

Another dream of Poe's is to share their native Burmese food with people in their New England home. Every morning Su Su still eats mohinga, a fish-based breakfast stew made with rice noodles. It's a staple food in Myanmar—some even call it the national dish. Poe particularly loves kyae oh, a rice noodle stew usually made with pork and egg. If you look at descriptions and photos of these dishes, it's easy to imagine that Burmese cuisine would be an instant hit! Let's hope this dream also

becomes a reality in the near future.

Unfortunately, the political situation in Myanmar is horrible. A civil war is raging due to the military coup three years ago. Now a citizen rebellion is trying to take back control. Su Su said the situation is worse than in Ukraine, but because Burma is less of an international player, it's gotten much less attention in the media. Poe and Su Su are U.S. citizens, so they can't go back to Myanmar until the situation has changed—it would be too dangerous. They consider themselves incredibly fortunate and are so grateful for the life they've built and the home they've found here. But life is not easy. As Su Su said, "It's not all cupcakes and rainbows. But I can't complain!" She loves her job, and she's proud of Pangea.

Our Co-op is proud, too, and so thankful for what Su Su and Poe and Pangea Sushi have brought us: beautiful food, loving connections, an expanded Co-op family, and a new appreciation for who and what we are at our best. We're honored to be part of the Pangea family, and we're so grateful they're here.



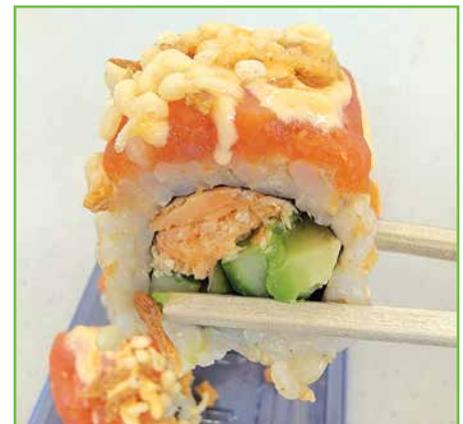
SUSHI FOR EVERYONE!

If you have a community event or party coming up, Pangea would love to cater.

A note from the author:

As the writer of many Producer of the Month articles, I've had the opportunity to hear directly from our local vendors about what it's like to do business with food co-ops compared to large chains. It's easy to miss if you don't have experience behind the scenes, but it's true: we treat local businesses better.

Selling lots of locally-made products means accommodating more labor-intensive delivery schedules, being willing to process hundreds of invoices vs a handful from major distributors, and, sometimes, holding the hands of inexperienced vendors as they learn the ropes. We also treat these small businesses with kindness, dignity, and respect. Cooperatively-owned grocery stores make the lives of people in our community better.



Pangea Sushi
TASTING
at the BFC!
Thursday,
April 13th
1:30-3:30 pm